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AUTHOR Florian, Judy E.
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ABSTRACT

Effective staff development for educators is ongoing and intensive; consequently, school districts are heeding this research and engaging in long-term contracts with technical assistance providers. Rural districts need external support provided by partnerships and need such assistance to meet state and community performance expectations. The federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program encourages schools to adopt an effective school reform model developed by an external organization. As ongoing staff development becomes more widespread and typical of what districts and schools engage in, an important question is what evaluation of these partnerships should look like. This paper discusses current research regarding collaborative partnerships and presents the types of partnerships that school districts have reported in a research study being conducted by the Regional Educational Laboratories. Four stages of partnership occur in a sequential progression toward collaboration: connection, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. Important issues regarding evaluation of the various partnership types are addressed. (DFR)

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Addressing Evaluation of Collaborations: Capacity Building by School Districts

Judy E. Florian, Ph.D.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

Paper presented at the 1999 Annual Meeting of the American Evaluation Association in Orlando, Florida

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Addressing Evaluation of Collaborations:
Capacity Building by School Districts

Judy E. Florian, Ph.D.
Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

Research has found that effective staff development for educators is ongoing and intensive (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Districts are heeding this research, and engaging in long term contracts with technical assistance providers. In particular, districts in rural settings are in need of the external support that partnerships can provide, and many districts are confronted with the need for external assistance in order to meet state and community performance expectations.

An example of policy supporting externally provided staff development within a school is the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRD), in which schools are strongly encouraged to adopt an effective school reform model as developed by an external organization. As ongoing staff development becomes more widespread and typical of what districts and schools are engaging in, an important question is what evaluation of these partnerships should look like.

In this paper, current research regarding collaborative partnerships is presented. If a school or district is to engage in ongoing professional development, the relationship between the school and the external service provider will likely conform to one of the forms of partnership described here.

Next, the types of partnerships that school districts have reported in a research study being conducted by the Regional Educational Laboratories as effectively promoting education reform are presented. The importance of ongoing, collaborative relationships with technical assistance organizations that support the capacity of the district to conduct evaluation and make data-driven decisions emerges as important in these examples. Specifically, once partnerships have ended, the district needs to have acquired the ability to make data-based decisions about effective policies and practices, in particular because the context in which schools and districts operate is currently continually changing as states adopt new policies regarding education reform.

Lastly, important issues regarding evaluation of the various partnership types is also addressed in

this paper. Considering that effective partnerships between school districts and external organizations were found to be coordinative or collaborative in nature, evaluation of these partnerships will also need to be partly or wholey collaborative. Key elements of evaluations of by type of partnership are presented.

Interorganizational collaboration

Recent research has contributed to our understanding of what makes partnerships successful. For the purposes of this paper, any relationship between organizations will be considered a partnership. Reading the materials of a particular organization on a widespread basis, attending a conference or training session, and contracting for short- or long-term professional development are all considered examples of partnerships. According to one model, four stages of partnership occur in a sequential progression toward collaboration: Connection, Cooperation, Coordination, and Collaboration (Intriligator, 1994; Krueger, 1996). A brief description of these four phases follows.

Connection The first stage is Connection among partners. Partners use the connection stage to communicate and gather information. There may or may not be a leader at this stage, but generally there is an initiator who desires the connection and sharing of information.

Cooperation In the second stage, Cooperation among partners takes place. Generally, an agreed-upon activity or task is undertaken by the partners at this stage, and as a result communication among partners increases. The dimensions of communication include frequency, intensity, and amount and level of information exchanged (Krueger, 1996). Increased communication produces changes in (and if successful, increases in) responsibility and trust among partners. There may or may not be a leader of the partnership at this stage, and the activities of the partnership tend to be ones partners could each complete on their own.

Coordination In the Coordination stage, partners are aligned around common goals or objectives and work together to achieve those objectives. At this stage, the partners are necessary constituents of the joint work because projects tend to be ones that partners could not complete on their own. The projects and activities become the focus of the partnership, and leadership is

shared among participants. Participants might adopt specific roles depending on the resources and skills they bring to the partnership.

Collaboration The model's final stage is Collaboration, which includes many elements of coordination, with the addition of long-term contact and joint work, and long-range goals promoting continued work together. Communication is deep and broad, trust is strong, and time and effort is devoted to the partnership. The partnership becomes dynamic and continues to change through more intense contact and joint work. Partners contribute resources to a collaboration, and partners desire to have the collaboration meet their individual interests and needs as well as everyone else's needs.

Mattessich and Monsey (1992) analyzed twelve research studies of collaboration and identified important partnership elements. In their paper, Mattessich and Monsey describe the development of collaborations over time in four areas: the vision and relationships grow stronger, the structure becomes more formal, leadership and control become shared, and resources are secured. (See the Appendix for a complete list of the 18 elements of a successful collaboration as identified by Mattessich and Monsey.)

Another recent model of collaboration comes from Himmelman (1996). This model is very similar to the ones already described here (i.e., consists of the same four stages enumerated by Intriligator and Krueger), but with different partnership areas identified. The areas unique to Himmelman's model include Risk, Resource sharing, and Commitment. Specifically, Himmelman suggests that collaboration tends to include higher risk than does networking or coordination. Also, resources are likely to be provided by all members of a collaboration, or planned for and pursued by the collaborative group. Lastly, commitment to a collaboration tends to be ongoing and long term, whereas at early stages in a partnership the commitment is short term, and centered around specific activities or tasks.

Barnett, Hall, Berg, and Camarena (1999) distinguish partnership developmental stages from partnership types. Two types most often engaged in by school districts are Barnett et al.'s Vendor Model and Collaboration Model. In the vendor model, money or other resources are exchanged for services between the organizations. In this type of partnership, the exchange is

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usually narrow in scope, agreed upon at the outset, and in place for a short period of time. In the collaborative model, positive relationships among members of the partnership from all organizations becomes vital, and the "purposes and desired outcomes are likely to be less specific and more ambitions, which means that outcomes will be less tangible and will be accomplished more slowly." Barnett et al. write that the collaborative model partnership can have substantial rewards for the organizations involved, but that these benefits are often delayed and difficult to document.

In conclusion, collaborations develop in a sequence of stages and forms, and this variation should be taken into account in evaluation of an ongoing partnership. It is likely that if evaluation of the collaboration occurs at all, it will be conducted by a party involved in the collaboration (i.e., the external agency and/or the school district) rather than a third party. Next, I present the specific partnerships mentioned in a research project the Regional Educational Laboratories are conducting regarding 16 school districts undergoing education reform.

School district collaborations

The examples of effective collaborations that are presented here come from a research project that McREL is engaged in with eight other Regional Educational Laboratories. In this project, we are examining 16 selected school districts engaged in education reform within various state contexts in order to examine what contributes to success in an increasingly accountability-based environment. These 16 districts were identified through solicited recommendations of school districts based on three criteria: 1) increased student achievement over time, 2) challenged in some way (e.g., student diversity, a rural setting, a history of low performance, etc.), and 3) heterogeneity of state contexts and geographic setting (i.e., urban, suburban, or small town/rural). These districts are not representative of districts in general, but they were chosen to examine based on their success at implementing education reform. By identifying the partnerships with external agencies that promoted reform as reported by these districts, it is hoped that the forms of promising collaborations with school districts can be identified. In these case studies, partnerships with external agencies emerged as an important contributor to district success, and it is the form and content of those partnerships that will be reported here.

Out of a total of 16 districts in the study, 10 districts reported that partnerships with external organizations contributed to education reform in their district. Partnerships developed in one of three ways: the content is identified in advance by the external agency, the content is mutually defined (in only one case), or the content area is identified by the school district. In many cases, the partnership was defined in advance, and served both the external agency (in its research and development effort) and the school district (in its capacity enhancement effort). For example, partnerships with Regional Educational Laboratories emerged as an important reform element in some districts, and the content of the collaboration was often defined in advance of the partnership. That is, the Regional Educational Laboratories had already identified a project to work on, and solicited districts to engage in developing materials with the agency. In another case, the state had contracted with the service provider for staff development, and therefore the content of that assistance was defined in advance. The service provider in these two examples was addressing school district needs at a general level when defining the content of the partnership, and the partnership required the external organization to adapt their service to the school district's particular setting.

In the second type of partnership engagement, the external organization (SERVE) and the district are engaged in an ongoing capacity enhancing partnership. In this case, the focus of the partnership changes with time, as new challenges and goals for the district emerge. In the third type of partnership engagement, the school district identifies a need and pursues a contract or partnership with an external agency. Partnerships with national agencies reportedly proceeded in this manner (e.g., the National Center for the Economy and Education or NCEE, and the League of Effective Schools).

As mentioned above, 10 districts reported partnerships with external agencies that had contributed to their education reform effort. In some cases, these partnerships had begun between five and ten years ago, but the district's current capacity was attributed in part to the collaboration. Three of the districts reported more than one partnership that they had engaged in, either sequentially or simultaneously, and a total of fourteen partnerships were reported. All but one partnership engaged the entire district or a sizeable number of schools in the district. (One district had only one school participating in the Comer project.) Table 1 presents the content of

these partnerships as described by the districts involved.

Table 1. Content of effective partnerships reported by school districts.

Main Content of Partnership	Number of Districts Reported	External Organizations
Assessment and data-driven decision making	6	Missouri State University, League of Effective Schools, NWREL, CREATE, NCEE
Curriculum and instruction	4	Learning Literacy Network, McREL, PREL, CONnect
Classroom performance assessment	3	McREL, Oregon ASCD, SERVE
Schoolwide reform	1	Comer

Most of the partnerships described included ongoing interaction between representatives from the school districts and the external agency.[1] When the four stages of partnerships are considered, these relationships between districts and organizations have progressed beyond communication and cooperation to the coordination and collaboration stages. It is likely that the collaborative aspect of these partnerships contributed to their impact on the districts in this study (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). This finding suggests that a collaborative, ongoing partnership is more likely to enhance district capacity than is a partnership consisting of, for example, a contract for one day of professional development.

It is interesting that a majority of the partnerships described involved capacity building of district and school level assessment and data-driven decision making. And these partnerships that contributed to school and district capacities to collect, analyze and interpret data when making decisions.

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[1]In only one partnership (with the Literacy Learning Network), lead teachers from seven of the district's schools received training that those individuals brought back to the school and their colleagues.

Implications for evaluation

As described above in the stage model of collaboration, the goals of a highly collaborative endeavor are supported by all participants. If the goals are collaboratively identified, it makes sense that the evaluation should be based on one coherent set of indicators. In reality, external organizations are likely to be interested in evaluative information that overlaps with the data that is useful for the school district. For example, the external agency might wish to evaluate its presentation of material to teachers, and this will be of less interest to the school or district. However, there are indicators such as student achievement and school climate, depending on the basis of the partnership, that will be of interest to both organizations. Evaluating the partnership collaboratively includes negotiating to define indicators, create data collection instruments, construct timelines, and assess the dynamic internal and external contexts of the school or district.

Table 2. Evaluation foci important for various forms of interorganizational partnerships.

Partnership Form	Key Partnership Elements	Evaluation Foci
Communicative and Cooperative	Independent organizations engage in short term projects that are not considered essential to either organization's functioning. Existing budgets are used.	For each individual organization: ■ Process, and ■ Outcomes of short term projects

Coordinative	Partners engage in projects that each organization could not complete on its own. Interagency units with specific functions might be established. Leadership and communication become more important. (E.g., an ongoing vendor relationship)	For each individual organization: ■ Work towards accomplishing individual organizational goals. Evaluation of the ***partnership*** assessing: ■ Management and leadership, and ■ Process.
Collaborative	Sustained relationships, a shared vision, and long term goals are established. Leadership is shared, and communication becomes frequent. Resources are attended to by all partners. (E.g., an ongoing R&D relationship between a district and organization)	Evaluation of ***partnership*** assessing: ■ Relationships (including communication and trust), ■ Identification of mutual goals, ■ Progress toward accomplishing shared goals (including work by subunits of partnership), and ■ Progress toward intermediary goals becomes important when goals are very long term.

Table 2 presents a cursory summary of important evaluation elements for various types of partnerships. In the communicative, cooperative, and coordinative types of partnerships, goals of individual organizations will remain unique to each agency, and thus evaluations by each organization are still necessary. In addition, the more coordinative a partnership becomes, the more important management, leadership, and communication are to all partners involved, and

these elements can thus be assessed as part of a mutual evaluation of the partnership.

If a true collaboration is occurring, then the goals of the collaboration are shared, and one evaluation of the collaboration should suffice. That is, understanding how and why education improvement was or was not promoted should be of interest to both collaborators, and the information held by all members of the partnership are necessary for a thorough understanding of the collaboration's progress.

Summary

Partnerships engaged in by education systems can be of varying forms, and these types of interorganizational relationships should be taken into account when evaluation is conducted. For example, more collaborative partnerships rely more heavily on relationships among organizations and members and progress toward long range goals. Thus, evaluation of a true collaboration should address these aspects of the partnership. However, evaluation of a cooperative or coordinative partnership might focus more on process, effect, and impact of the endeavor.

In addition to importance of adapting evaluation to the type of partnership engaged in, this research addressed the content of partnerships that contribute to educational reform. Districts reported that the capacity to evaluate instructional and organizational policies and practices is something that can be and often is enhanced through partnerships. Six of the 14 effective partnerships reported in this study had data collection and data-driven decision making as a major focus. After these partnerships are dissolved or involvement is decreased, the ability of the school or district to assess the effects of changes in policy and practice on its own is important.

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Appendix

Factors Influencing Success of Collaboration

From Mattessich and Monsey (1992)

Environment

1. A history of collaboration or cooperation in the community
2. Collaborative group seen as a leader in the community
3. Political/social climate favorable

Membership Characteristics

1. Mutual respect, understanding, and trust
2. Appropriate cross-section of members
3. Members see collaboration as in their self-interest
4. Ability to compromise

Process/Structure

1. Members share a stake in both process and outcome
2. Multiple layers of decision-making
3. Flexibility
4. Adaptability

Communication

1. Open and frequent communication
2. Established informal and formal communication links

Purpose

1. Concrete, attainable goals and objectives
2. Shared vision
3. Unique purpose

Resources

1. Sufficient funds
2. Skilled convener